Unfixed Selves

Ian Iqbal Rashid
The Heat Yesterday. Coach House $12.95

Rienzi Crusz
Beatitudes of Ice. TSAR $10.95

Suwanda Sugunasiri
The Faces of Galle Face Green. TSAR $10.95

Reviewed by Vijay Mishra

These books of poems show the unusually vibrant side of Canada's multicultural experience. Indeed some of the very best Canadian verse is being written by the many diasporas in Canada. Movement from one locale to another, from an earlier space where foundational narratives are constructed, where the metaphors of living come into being, where information and experience are packaged and bottled to be sent across seas (which in turn needs to be deciphered, learnt, memorized, "deep in a rusting city-centre") in short movement from one country to another creates a consciousness about one's past that has been theorized, in very recent times, as diasporic poetics. One of the key characteristics of this poetics has to do with the dilemma of unfixed selves. How does one write about these selves, how does one negotiate living here (in this instance Canada) and writing out narratives invaded by earlier memories?

Ian Iqbal Rashid's unfixed self can trace his ancestry back to India, but he was born in an Indian diasporic community going back at least a hundred years. Rashid's poems (laid out as prose poems and as free verse) speak about loss, but this collection is less about memory of homeland than about selves whose bodies problematize the whole idea of identity and self-hood. He takes us to marginalized beings (sexually, racially, and so on) within our own democratic Western communes. The first poem in this

collection, "Song of Sabu," may be seen as a prologue to migration of people of colour to Western nation-states. Here we have the figure of the migrant outsider, long before globalization had taken hold of modernity, whose body is on display as exotic, and as providing the essential exoticism for the fantasy genre of so many Hollywood movies of the thirties and forties. What is striking in this poem is not just the "unfixed self," the mobile, rootless self, finally in America with only memories, but the point of view that gives another twist to Sabu as a corporeal being: "Sometimes during the day I catch myself in the mirror. The carelessly put together beauty found in young boys. But day time ghosts—they're easily dealt with." That sense of the body—and its powerful expression—can be seen in "Mango Boy" where gay sexuality is imaged through the richly textured and lush metaphors of that most alluring of all tropical fruit:

> I eat mangoes, sliced
> see the cayenne
> sprinkled, machine-gunned through
> honey-coloured
> flesh
> Then I ride my lover high. . . .

Even as these themes of passion and desire get replayed, we are conscious of the poetry of diaspora, the poetry of making sense of our lives as transplanted, transcultural, deeply uprooted communities. It is here that the titles of the poems—Bastards of the Diaspora," "Another Country," "Knowing Your Place"—persuade us that there is something rather significant going on here. These Canadian poets are now bringing to the nation a new voice: no longer nationalistic, no longer the cringe of a lesser fragment society in the shadows of mother England or France, but a vibrant new Canadian voice without, at least in this positive sense, a dominant tradition that seeks conformity.

If Rashid has moved from one diaspora to or the other two poets are part of the first major movement of people from the Indian subcontinent to Canada in the sixties. Rienzi Crusz and Suwanda Suganasiri are Sri Lankan migrants who have lived in Canada for over thirty years, long enough to have thought about homelands in much more detached terms, and long enough to problematize labels like "postcolonial," "diasporic," and "migrant" writing. Even as events in another country function as an important background, these poets engage with the poetic experience itself: how indeed does one transform reflection into mediated poetic meanings? The title of Crusz's collection comes from a poem subtitled "The Immigrant's Progress."

> I've learnt the beatitudes of ice,
> something sacred, something cold,
> demanding respect. . . .

The religious discourse here is self-consciously deployed, and respect is demanded by "ice" which in turn is the strong, pervasive metaphor of the new "home." The normal discourse of dreariness, of despair and isolation associated with snow—snow makes one homebound, jars nerves, makes one proprietorial about warmth and space—is given a different inflection and implies the migrant's final sense of appeasement after "twenty winters in my bones." In another poem ("After the Snowfall"), the "summer eyes" of the poetic persona reminds us of the diasporic condition, self-consciously connected with the archetypal diasporic narrative: the journey of the Jews out of Egypt and into the promised land. Crusz no longer needs diasporic narrative for his poetic vision—there is a point at which all art breaks away from its past—but when he does return to them it is to awaken a memory that grounds the self (fleetingly) and offers a position of contrast. So in "City Without a Name" the emerging multicultural city is made meaningful through a return to exotic, tropical descriptions. In "Memory's Truth" memory is presented as

a debate, as an issue to be contested, mulled over, and not something that is always fixed:

> How argue the diaspora?
> Would I let nostalgia
> flirt with hyperbole?
> Is there enough love
> to conjure past perfections,
> forget, forgive
> those strident voices,
> the arrythmia of the wicked heart?

Even as the agenda for the debate is laid down, the son born in Canada has "hamburgers (with everything on it)" and fails when it comes to connecting with the farmer's bare back, the "thick wearied legs" of the buffalo, and the paddy. And the debate continues as the son replies in "Distant Rain:"

> do you have to hang up your story
> like a butcher's side of beef?
> Why another poem?
> Why roll the rock
> from the mouth of the tomb,
> what's there in shadows, dry bones,
> memories?

There is one kind of answer in "Synthesis," an exercise in which a name "fuses East and West." But even as there is synthesis, for the son, home is not the home of Sri Lankan cousins. Instead

> Home is where the snowman
> sits on the front lawn
> and waits patiently
> for his return.

The idea of home and homeland, the narrative logic of diaspora (the desire to return to a homeland) is not altogether simple. The child born in Canada has a sense of home that is material—a house, friends, a landscape, a connection through language (English/French) which is the child's mother-tongue. For so many diasporic peoples of colour ("visible minorities"), the very definition of the "mother tongue" is highly problematic: mother tongues are no longer the language of their mothers; mother tongues are the language of the nation in which they live, the language that they speak most fluently, the language in which they think. Their speech doesn't have the sanction of genealogy, of phylogenesis. To situate Kushwant Singh's memorable line here to good effect: "My mother tongue is English although my mother doesn't speak a word of it." Difficult, unresolvable questions, but with powerful political implications nevertheless: cultural theory demands answers, or at least an engagement with the issues. The poetic vision looks elsewhere; questions may not lead to answers, as we discover in "The Sun-Man takes a Tattoo":

> Don't ask for answers,
> ask for history: the pain
> of my woundings, the diaspora
> that runs through my life
> like an alphabet.

Another question—the question that the diaspora is asked most often—"Where are you from?" ("After the K-W Writer's Award")—can only be answered by the poet's "fire and song."

An accomplished writer in Singhalese and a well-known critic and commentator, Suwanda Sugunasiri's English poems have been restricted to journals and newspapers until now. But some eight years of writing verse have now been collected under the name of one of the poems in the collection, "The Faces of Galle Face Green." This encapsulates the dominant themes of Sugunasiri's verse: a strong political commitment alongside detached, pietistic Buddhism. Sugunasiri recalls the recent, highly divisive, history of his homeland Sri Lanka. There is much less of the diasporic in his verse and much more of a straight out pleading for common sense and non-violence. The poet speaks about the strength of tradition against fad, especially in the real world of politics. Why import

Marx when so many native discourses remain untouched, unknown? Written in 1982, "The Faces of Galle Face Green" senses the highly volatile nature of ethnic politics in Sri Lanka. The poet recalls the promise of revolution soon overtaken by equally intense neglect and abuse of responsibility. Sugunasiri returns to the theme of equanimity, the middle way, the way of action in detachment, never the excesses of the revolutionary nor the resignation of the renouncer, in "The Fish Vendor":

> The spice you
> didn't take—
> critical-compassion—all
> I have
> to help you bide by,
> till
> you snap out
> out of your
> karmic misery,
> garnering merit
> in mind body word, as
> you alone can
> in a new universe.

This quietistic humanism bespeaks inspiration from native models, the tried and successful texts. In perhaps the most political poem in the collection—"Bridges"—composed a year after the 1983 ethnic riots in Sri Lanka. Sugunasiri's defence of multiethnic liberal democratic states is unwavering:

> Arunachalam, Ramanathan
> co-freedom fighters
> of one Lanka
> these your models
> not Chelvanayakam, Amirthalingam.
> Read *Mahabharata, Ramayana*
> *Silappadikaran, Dhammapada*
> these your fountains
> not *Das Kapital.*
> Mao Castro Arafat
> Liberators all
> but please
> not ethnic enclaves
> Ireland Cyprus Quebec.

Rashid, Crusz, Sugunasiri, offer diasporic voices that speak not of homelands alone, nor of the agony of living in displacement but of "unfixed selves" that weave magical poems that refashion the citizen. In his polemical introduction Sugunasiri refers to his own earlier plea for a redefinition of the Canadian literary canon where ethnic writings had so far been no more than footnotes to a grander Canadian Anglo-French tradition. These volumes demonstrate how there is now a multiply centred Canadian sensibility that transcends ethnic boundaries. The poems are Canadian insofar as their particular voices have been produced by a specifically Canadian (multicultural) sensibility.